

How Adult Foundational Education Can Support Equitable Workforce and Economic Development

Presented at an initial meeting of a new national network of urban adult foundational education coalitions

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We'll . . .

1. Briefly explain terminology.
2. Discuss:
 1. *How might past work-related AFE inform a new approach focusing on “equitable workforce and economic development”?*
 2. *What would a community-oriented, equity-focused, collaborative approach look like?*
 3. *What would this approach require?*
 4. *What actions might AFE and partners take to transition to this approach?*
 5. *How might a national urban AFE network support “AFE for equitable workforce and economic development”?*

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Terminology we'll use today

- AFE:
 - based in multiple institutions, working with diverse partners;
 - serves diverse populations of adults and out-of-school youth;
 - helps them develop transferable assets they need for meaningful work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles:
 - foundational/basic communication, problem-solving, and collaboration skills (see EFF)
 - content knowledge and technical skills and tools (e.g., digital technologies)
 - social-emotional strengths (self-efficacy, personal plans...)
 - credentials (academic, occupational, driver's license, citizenship, library cards)
 - support systems
- Equitable: fair, impartial (as in the just distribution of opportunities, responsibilities, and rewards within a society)
- Workforce development: strengthening the capacities of workers
- Economic development: strengthening the economic institutions (e.g., individual workplaces; industries; and local, state, regional, national economies) within which workers participate

Question 1

How might past work-related AFE efforts inform a new approach focusing on “equitable workforce and economic development”?

- Workforce development and economic development have been a focus of AFE for more than three decades...
 - In workplace education programs for incumbent workers, work-readiness programs for job seekers, and more recent career pathway programs for diverse industries.
 - Generating diverse resources (models, strategies, tools, funding) that we might now use.
 - Revealing both challenges and opportunities for workers, AFE providers, and other stakeholders.
- While positive in many ways, the quality and reach of these services are not adequate, especially if we now want “equity” (social justice) to be a more-explicit focus/purpose.
- AFE supporters should learn from previous efforts as we develop better ways to serve our communities.
- As one of our first steps, we should better understand the stakeholders we might work with and serve.

Stakeholders include . . .

- Workers who have limitations related to foundational skills and other assets they need for work and other roles
- AFE providers
- Other service providers (e.g., workforce, health, childcare and eldercare, correctional, digital access, financial, immigration, disabilities ...)
- Employers
- Labor unions
- Policy makers and funders
- Others (e.g., research organizations...)

Challenges include . . .

- Workers challenged not only by limited “assets” but lack healthcare, digital access, childcare, eldercare, transportation, housing, ...
- Challenging job market (e.g., limited family-sustaining jobs for workers)
- AFE programs not equipped or available to provide relevant, quality services (due to limited funding, lack of PD, reliance on ineffective strategies...)
- Other stakeholders (service providers, employers....) not equipped to work with basic skills-challenged adults
- Decline in leadership on this issue from government, corporate, labor, and AFE

Opportunities include . . .

- Workers with desire to succeed - and with significant prior skills and support systems to work with
- Effective models/tools for integrated services have been developed for AFE providers and others to use
- Increased interest in social justice across many stakeholders
- Some forward-thinking leadership from employers, unions, AFE, other stakeholders

In sum, these challenges and opportunities...

- Are complex
 - multi-dimensional (e.g., involving policy, resources, cultural/social assumptions and practices...), deeply rooted, and across multiple stakeholders
- Can block or support . . .
 - equitable opportunities for workers and their families to achieve economic security and general well-being;
 - creation of better (more equitable, relevant, efficient, healthy, environmentally sustainable) workplaces and economic-social systems.
- Can provide focal points for instructional and other supports for learners.
- Will require . . .
 - new kinds of strategic thinking and action among multiple partners
 - a multi-phase effort geared toward systemic changes
 - solid, sustained leadership, policies, and financial and in-kind investments

Question 2

What would a community-oriented, equity-focused, collaborative approach look like?

An overall focus on solving community problems through development and use of community assets

- A central hub responsible for planning, monitoring, resource development, capacity building, coordinating of a community-wide system
- A network of well-equipped AFE providers who collaborate with other stakeholders in various ways
- Collaborative projects customized to the AFE-related needs of particular learner populations and other stakeholders
- Capacity building of AFE and other stakeholders, to enable them to continuously plan, implement, improve, and expand services, using evidence-based strategies and tools.
- Empowering instructional and other supports that help learners serve as problem-solvers and leaders in the contexts they operate in so they can strategically use opportunities while. . .
 - *Mitigating and navigating* challenges
 - *Eliminating* challenges and *creating* better (alternative) ways of doing things

Question 2 (cont'd.)

Some examples

- “Community Workforce AFE” action plans developed for cities and counties, drawing on existing and new information
- Projects customized to selected learners, industries, jobs, skills, contexts
 - “ESL for Eldercare”: English and other skills/knowledge needed to provide high quality eldercare services (e.g., communicate with patients, their families, and eldercare agencies . . .)
 - “Career Readiness for TLD”: career exploration; development of transferable language, numeracy, and digital skills to perform job tasks while dealing with health, financial literacy, safety, environmental issues....
 - “Civil Service Test Prep”: Transit workers develop test-taking skills to succeed on promotional exams
 - General career exploration/readiness skills taught in AFE and workforce centers through participatory activities (project-based learning; creative uses of PPT, web browsing, and other common applications)

Question 3

What would this approach require?

- Financial and in-kind investments (from diverse sources) that are sufficient, timely, easy-to-access, easy-to-use, and sustained
- Leadership (at all levels) that is both . . .
 - “principled”: collaborative; system-oriented; respectful and responsive to both learners and other stakeholders; committed (and persistent) to high quality, professionalism, leadership development....
 - “practical”: strategic; organized; uses effective practices in creative, flexible ways; able to try new things but also “say no”

Question 4

What actions might AFE and partners take to transition to this approach?

Action 1: Form an initial planning team to . . .

1. Reflect on what community has already done to integrate AFE with workforce and economic development.
2. Identify (a) focal points for new projects (e.g., worker populations; relevant foundational skills and technical skills/knowledge; jobs; worker life issues...) and (b) potential partners (e.g., employers, unions, workforce, health, legal, and other services...)
3. Dig more deeply with those partners to better understand their perspectives, assets, limitations.

Actions (cont'd.)

Action #2: Develop a community-oriented AFE action plan showing...

- Particular needs and assets (e.g., workers, industries, employers, jobs, skills...) to focus on initially and over time.
- Resources (e.g., project teams, central coordination, funding, facilities, partnerships...) for a multi-year, multi-phase system-building process that both responds to immediate, specific needs and opportunities while laying a groundwork for future efforts.

Actions (cont'd.)

Action #3: Implement and learn from initial pilot phase via...

- Focused demonstration/pilot projects
- Capacity-building by creating . . .
 - templates of curricula and assessments, counseling/coaching, professional development, community outreach, and other tools that can be adapted to future projects
 - professional positions and supports for teams who will do this work

Actions (cont'd.)

Action #4: As evidence emerges, advocate for this work within communities and with potential supporters.